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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 003535

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON COLOMBIANS EXPELLED FROM VENEZUELA

REF: BOGOTA 3421; BOGOTA 3527; CARACAS 1517

CLASSIFIED BY: Mark Wells, Political Counselor, Embassy Bogota;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) The Colombian Government (GOC) continues to assist the nearly 600 Colombian (and 41 Brazilian) gold miners expelled from Venezuela on November 28. Another 200 Colombians fearing retaliation have also returned from the area on their own. The GOC sent a high-level delegation to the border to deliver humanitarian assistance and has relocated 213 persons to other parts of Colombia. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is providing economic assistance to the group with USG funds. The GOC and international organizations have not been able to substantiate other reports of massive returns of Colombians from Venezuela in recent months, but there are concerns that hostile conditions in Venezuela will force significant returns. Post has strongly encouraged the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Red Cross (ICRC) to investigate and respond to any violations of international humanitarian law or failure to honor international obligations by the Venezuelan Government, including speaking out if necessary. End Summary.

GOC Assisting Expelled Colombians (and Brazilians)

12. (C) The GOC continues to provide assistance to the nearly 600 Colombian (and 41 Brazilian) gold miners expelled from Venezuela on November 28 (Ref A). According to the GOC and media reports, the group had been working without proper migration status in illegal mines in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas when the Venezuelan National Guard suddenly descended on the remote area and forced the miners and their families to return to Colombia (Ref B). Juan Pablo Franco, the director of the GOC's assistance programs for internally displaced persons (IDPs), told Post's Regional Refugee Coordinator (Refcoord) that some in the group had reported

suffering harsh labor conditions and exploitation while working in Venezuela. In the past two weeks, another 200 Colombians fearing retaliation have also returned from the area on their own.

13. (U) On December 4, the GOC sent a high-level delegation, with representatives from the President's Office, the Ministry of Defense, and the National Ombudsman's Office, to Puerto Inirida in Colombia's Guainia Department to deliver humanitarian assistance to the group. The GOC has provided transportation to 213 persons to return to other parts of the country. At the GOC's request, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is providing economic assistance to the group (including the Brazilians) with resources from USAID. Each person is receiving the approximate equivalent of USD \$300 to cover immediate needs. The other 600 persons who did not relocate are currently staying in shelters in Puerto Inirida and plan to remain in the area, according to IOM.

14. (C) Christophe Beney, the ICRC Colombia head of delegation, told Refcoord that the GOC had also requested that the Colombian Red Cross provide assistance to the group in Colombia and to those still in Venezuela. Media reports indicated that approximately 1,000 other persons working in the mines escaped Venezuelan authorities and remained in the area. Beney said that helping the group in Colombia was not an issue, but it was highly unlikely the Colombian Red Cross would receive permission from the Venezuelan

Government (GBRV) to cross the border to provide aid. He added that the Venezuelan Red Cross was weak and not in a position to provide any help. The two ICRC delegates in Venezuela are monitoring the situation, but have limited capacity to cover the entire 1375-mile shared border. Beney stressed that the rights of Colombians in Venezuela should be respected, but he does not see a role of intervention for the ICRC in respect to the particular case of the expelled miners.

Other Reports of Colombians Returning En Masse

15. (C) As for a recent report from the Colombian Ombudsman's Office that 7,000 Colombians had returned from Venezuela due to threats in recent months, Franco confirmed that Accion Social, the GOC's coordinating agency for humanitarian assistance, had followed-up with national and local government offices, international organizations, and other local NGO contacts on the Colombia-Venezuela border and could not detect a large increase in returns. Franco said that individual returns continued as normal, but a sharp increase in Colombians coming back had not been detected. Accion Social is planning to visit the area again in the coming weeks to work with local authorities on contingency plans for increased returns given tense conditions on the border and reports of growing hostility toward Colombians in Venezuela.

16. (C) UNHCR reported that it also was unable to detect a large increase in returns after conducting field visits and consulting with its network of local partners in the border area. Jean Noel Wetterwald, the UNHCR Colombia country representative, told Refcoord that the international protection/ refugee recognition process in Venezuela was bad before, but has not gotten significantly worse recently. Wetterwald stressed that the situation could quickly change and more Colombians could return if they felt harassed and unprotected. IOM also reported that it was unable to confirm the 7,000 figure or to identify an increase in returns. UNHCR and IOM continue to actively monitor the situation from both sides of the border.

IOs Encouraged to Respond

¶7. (SBU) Post has strongly encouraged UNHCR and ICRC to investigate and respond to any violations of international humanitarian law or failure to honor international obligations by the GBRV, including speaking out if necessary. We continue to work with the GOC and international organizations to ensure assistance and protection are provided.

NICHOLS